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The Military Situation In Kurdistan

An Intelligence Assessment

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November 1979

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The Military Situation In Kurdistan (U)

An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 1 October 1979
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This assessment was prepared by [] of
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This paper has been coordinated with the Office of
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**The Military Situation
In Kurdistan**




Key Judgments

The Iranian Kurds are likely to launch widespread guerrilla war in Kurdistan this winter if their current negotiations with the Iranian Government fail. Despite Tehran's recent apparent successes, Kurdish forces remain largely intact, reportedly are gaining new recruits, and are initiating small assaults on isolated government outposts. 

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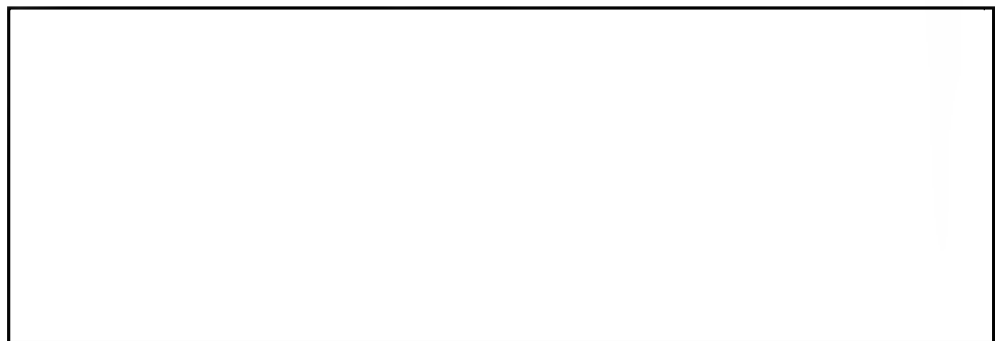
Tehran's military position in the region almost certainly would deteriorate quickly should the Kurds begin major guerrilla operations. Government forces in the northeast are an assortment of half-strength regular units, supplemented by gendarmes and paramilitary troops loyal to Khomeini. Command and control of these disparate forces are difficult, morale is low in some units, and with winter setting in, resupply and air support will become increasingly tenuous. 

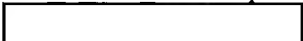
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Iraq is the neighboring state that would be most directly affected by a prolonged Kurdish guerrilla war in Iran. Baghdad's forces have the situation in their own Kurdish areas under control so far and are prepared to act ruthlessly to stamp out unrest there. Prolonged fighting in Iran, however, would raise the possibility that Iraqi Kurds will become increasingly involved in supporting their Iranian counterparts. Moreover, if Iranian Kurds were successful, they might well turn their attention to helping Iraqi rebels. 

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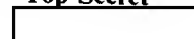


The degree to which the Kurds can take advantage of Tehran's weakness and cause trouble for Iraq and Turkey will be determined by their ability to resolve differences within their own ranks. The Kurds reportedly are attempting to deal with this problem, but their success thus far appears limited. 

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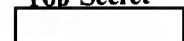
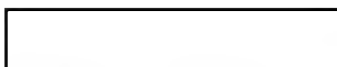


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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Key Judgments	iii
Background	1
Present Situation	1
In Iran	1
In Iraq	3
In Turkey	4
Outlook	5

Map	Foldout
Regular Forces in Kurdish Areas	



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The Military Situation in Kurdistan

Background

The last major Kurdish uprising climaxed in late 1974 and early 1975, when some 30,000 Iraqi rebels led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani and supported by Iranian artillery, air defense, and logistic units faced some 100,000 Iraqi troops augmented by Kurdish irregulars. By early 1975 the government forces had pushed the rebels into a narrow strip along Iraq's borders with Iran and Turkey. That March, Iran withdrew its support and the rebellion collapsed.

During the next four years, a handful of Kurds led by Jalal Talabani, a longtime Barzani rival, continued the struggle against the Iraqis.

weapons and supplies and were allowed to evacuate unharmed. Later, when the Army took the offensive, jets and helicopters bombed and strafed Kurdish positions, whereupon the Kurds withdrew to avoid casualties, and the Army advanced.

The limited information available suggests that the combined strength of the Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish groups in northwestern Iran is between 10,000 and 20,000 trained personnel. This number, however, is likely to increase dramatically during the next few months as the Iranian groups are swelled by new

In contrast, Iranian Kurds were relatively quiet until early this year. Shortly after the fall of the Shah, they seized the Army garrison at Mahabad, which holds special significance for Kurds as the capital of a short-lived Kurdish republic in 1946. By late summer, augmented by some Talabani and Barzani forces, Iranian Kurds had overrun most of the smaller military outposts between Shahpur and Sanandaj and were threatening several of the larger towns in the region. Tehran responded by rushing in reinforcements and launching a counteroffensive which returned all major towns and highways to its control, while the Kurds melted into the countryside.

Present Situation

In Iran

Kurdish forces in Iran remain largely intact, having generally avoided the Iranian Army's superior firepower. In early 1979, when they were on the offensive, most engagements consisted of the Kurds' surrounding small outposts, whose defenders surrendered their

The Iranian rebels will not lack weapons. Normally well armed even in peacetime, the Kurds have augmented their arsenals with arms captured from Army depots—small arms, grenade launchers, mortars, and ammunition. They also captured at least 13 tanks and a similar number of artillery pieces at Mahabad (two of the tanks have since been retaken by government forces). In addition, large quantities of arms and ammunition reportedly have been smuggled into Iranian Kurdistan since early 1979. Tehran has charged the USSR, Israel, and Iraq with complicity in

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Iranian Kurds atop a captured army tank

the smuggling. Iranian Kurdish leaders do have close ties to Communist and leftist organizations

We have no direct evidence that the Iraqis are supporting the Iranian rebels, although they are providing shelter for Kurds fleeing across the border. However, a consider-

Government forces in northwestern Iran include an assortment of units numbering between 30,000 and 40,000 regular and militia troops. The one armored and two infantry divisions stationed in Kurdish areas

Iranian press reports state that some 5,000 Revolutionary Guards, a militia force composed

largely of ethnic Persians fiercely loyal to Khomeini, are also stationed in Kurdish areas to back up the Army. During this summer's fighting, the government brought in as reinforcements additional Revolutionary Guards and some 5,000 to 7,000 Army troops,

Despite the apparent success of its offensive this summer, the government's military position remains precarious.

Government forces are spread thin, morale is reported to be low, several soldiers were recently executed for helping the Kurds, and many units are drastically understrength because of desertions.¹ The troops are at the end of long and tenuous supply lines and, with winter setting in, providing resupply and air support will be increasingly

¹ Under the Shah, soldiers of minority extraction were generally stationed far from home. The revolutionary government has allowed minority soldiers to be garrisoned in their home areas, a gesture it probably now regrets

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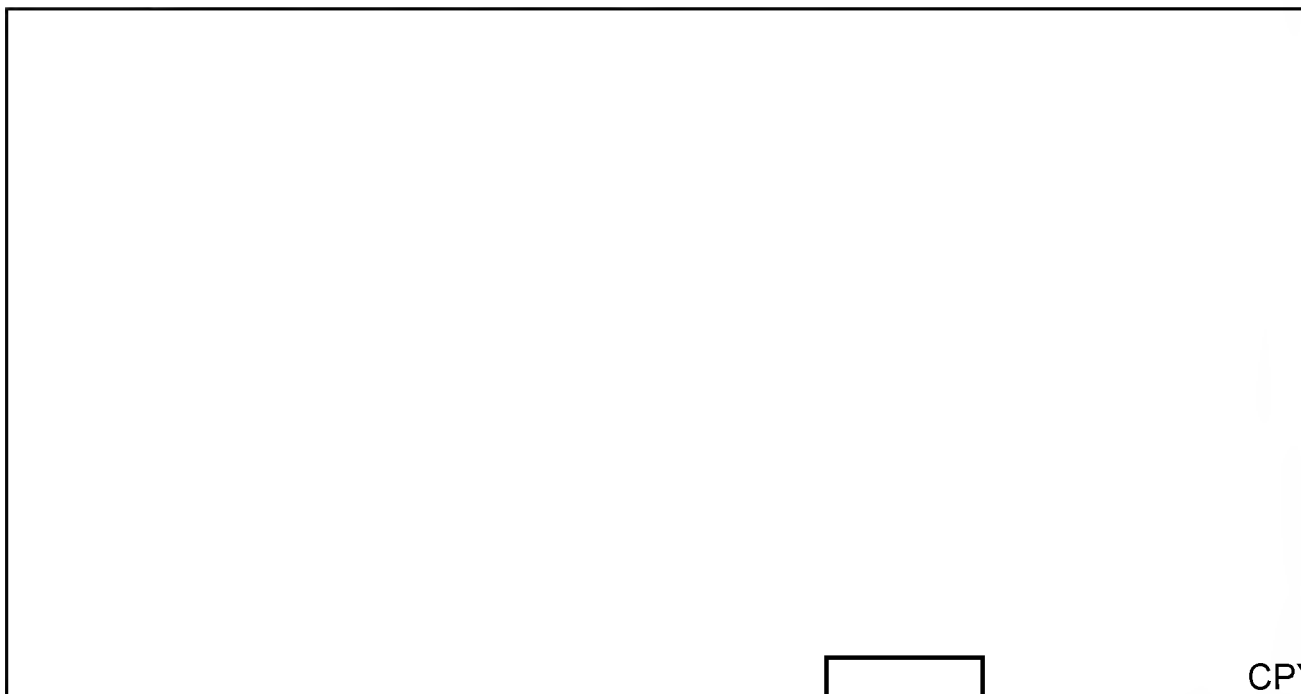
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Kurds as well, but their familiarity with the climate and terrain and their ability to live off the land probably will enable them to fare much better than the Army. [redacted]

Coordinating the activities of the Revolutionary Guard units and the government forces is a major problem in the northwest. The Army generally despises the Revolutionary Guards as ill-trained troublemakers, whereas the Guards look upon the Army as filled with potential counterrevolutionaries. The Guards are mostly ethnic Persians brought in from elsewhere in the country, and they tend to be brutal in their

A strip 15 to 20 kilometers wide along the Turkish and Iranian borders has been cleared of civilians and turned into a free-fire zone. Heliborne commandos and mountain infantry units conduct almost daily operations in search of dissident Kurds. Numerous military strongpoints are positioned on high points along the border and throughout the security zone. The government has also engaged in a major roadbuilding and resettlement program during the past four years to facilitate its control of the Kurdish population. [redacted]

Neither the Talabani rebels based along the border east of As Sulaymaniyah nor the Barzani forces located farther north at Qandil Mountain have been able to establish a secure base of operations inside Iraq. Instead, small groups have infiltrated the security zone, avoided government patrols, and attacked isolated outposts. As of mid-May 1979, [redacted] these fire fights were exacting a daily toll of about seven military personnel killed or wounded. More recently, however, the level of rebel activity in Iraq has declined, as Iraqi Kurds have turned their attention to helping their Iranian brothers.

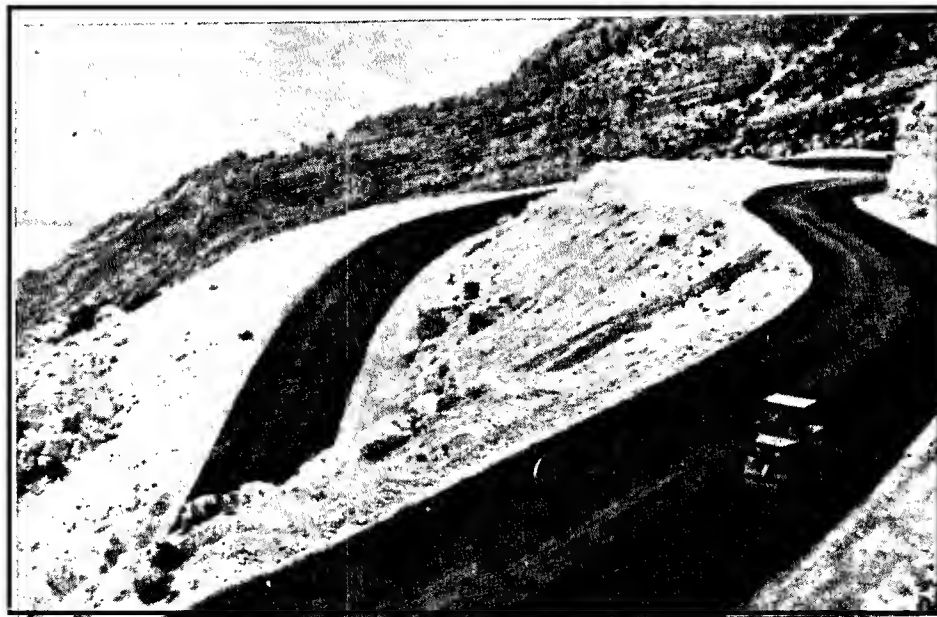
In Iraq

In contrast, the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is relatively calm. Some 110,000 Iraqi troops and paramilitary personnel form a pervasive security force.

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*Rugged terrain in
Iraqi Kurdistan*

Although Tehran has accused Baghdad of helping the rebels, we have no direct evidence to support the

X1 [redacted]
X1 refugees fleeing Iran—as many as 80,000, [redacted]
X1 [redacted] Some of the refugees are Iraqi
X1 Kurds who fled Iraq after the collapse of the 1975
X1 revolt. [redacted]

[redacted] A hands-off policy would seem to
make the most sense for Iraq, which is susceptible to a
Kurdish insurrection of its own. Iraq would prefer to
have the Kurds in Iraq, where they can be controlled,
rather than in Iran, where they are potential recruits
for the Talabani and Barzani rebels. [redacted]

In Turkey

X1 The Kurds in Turkey appear to be too deeply divided to
stage a coordinated uprising. A bewildering array of
political parties and factions contend for Kurdish
leadership, and there are deep tribal rivalries as well as
urban and rural differences which no local leader has
yet been able to overcome. These Kurds number about
[redacted]

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Outlook

Over the next few months the Iranian Kurds almost certainly will carry out their threat to wage widespread guerrilla warfare, should their current negotiations with the government fail. Despite the arrival in Kurdistan of a delegation from the Ayatollah Khomeini in October, they continue to mount small attacks on government forces, and protesters and leaflets in Kurdish towns state that major guerrilla attacks will begin this winter; few Kurds have surrendered their weapons, despite Tehran's offers of monetary rewards to do so. Their likely immediate strategy will be to carve out sanctuaries along the border with Iraq by cutting roads, ambushing convoys, and isolating and overwhelming the small military outposts Iran has reestablished in the area. They are also quite likely to take advantage of the hostility of the Army and the local population toward the Revolutionary Guards by avoiding regular units whenever possible and concentrating their attacks on the Guards. Such a campaign could escalate this winter, when Kurdish forces probably will be significantly larger and when poor weather will limit the air support available to government units and restrict movement of armor and artillery to the main roads. [REDACTED]

The Army's superior firepower virtually assures its hold on most major towns, at least as long as supplies and morale hold out. The Kurdish population in several towns, however, is quite hostile toward government forces—particularly the Revolutionary Guards—and some urban uprisings are likely. The government's ability to respond to a guerrilla campaign in the countryside will be limited by a lack of trained [REDACTED]

summer are likely to remain, but few additional troops can be expected because of both the need to control other restive minorities and the chaos prevailing in the armed forces. The weakness of the Army's position is [REDACTED]

The government has begun a recruitment campaign to augment the Revolutionary Guards, which could well make up the bulk of any further reinforcements. [REDACTED]

widespread. The Revolutionary Guards attempt to make up in enthusiasm what they lack in training, but they have generally done poorly when not backed by regular forces, particularly by air support. [REDACTED]

Iraq will be the neighboring state most affected by a continuation of the Kurdish revolt in Iran, because most of the rebel bases are near their common border. Baghdad will act ruthlessly to put down any sign of trouble among its own Kurds. Militarily, it should be able to keep the situation from getting out of hand unless Iranian Kurds are completely victorious. Its Kurdish population is smaller than Iran's or Turkey's, whereas the forces it uses to police its Kurdish areas are larger—and it has another 60,000 to 75,000 combat troops readily available as reinforcements. Iraqi units have had extensive experience in counter-insurgency operations, are reasonably proficient, and are supported by a large force of helicopters. [REDACTED]

Thus far, Baghdad has been relatively successful in keeping the rebels from establishing bases among the Kurdish population of northern Iraq. As a result, the Talabani and Barzani groups have been unable to increase their size significantly for the past several years. To change this situation, Iraqi Kurds will need major support from Iranian rebels. Should such support be forthcoming, Iraqi Kurds are likely to [REDACTED]

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attempt to carve out secure areas on their side of the border, particularly in As Sulaymaniyah Province. The casualties from a prolonged upsurge in Kurdish activity could pose political problems for new Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and almost certainly would reduce severely the amount of attention Iraq could devote to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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The Kurds' ability to succeed in Iran and to cause problems for Iraq and Turkey will be determined by the extent to which they can submerge their tribal, political, and national differences. The Iranian Kurds are split along tribal and political lines, and some of the tribes are cooperating with the government. The Iranian Kurds do not have close ties to the Barzani and Talabani Kurds from Iraq and, despite instances of cooperation, scattered clashes have occurred between Iranian and Iraqi Kurds. Turkish Kurds generally have few ties with their Iranian and Iraqi counterparts, and the two groups of Iraqi rebels feud almost constantly. The three national governments have used these differences to set the Kurds against each other in the past, and they almost certainly will attempt to do so

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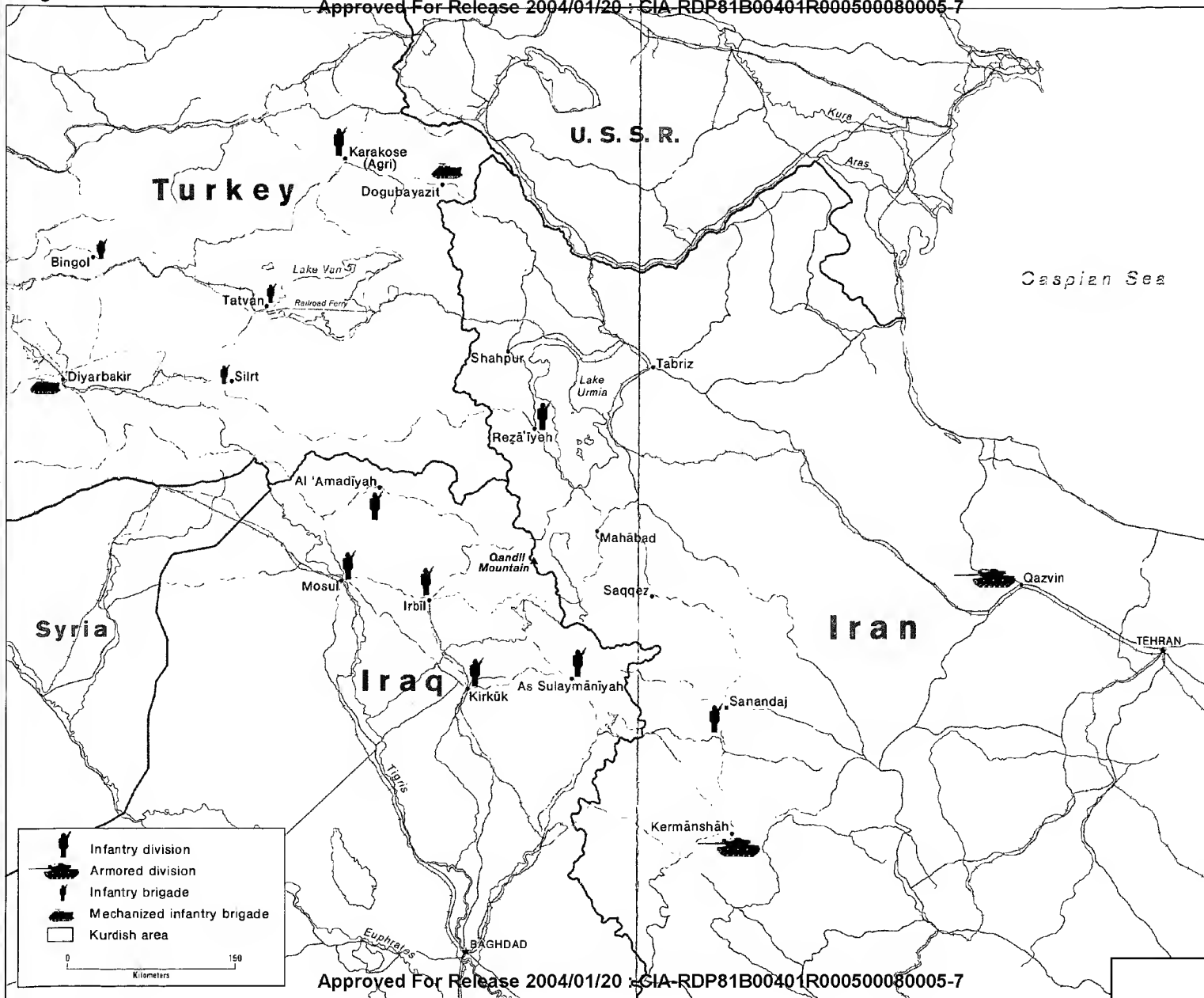
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Regular Forces in Kurdish Areas

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